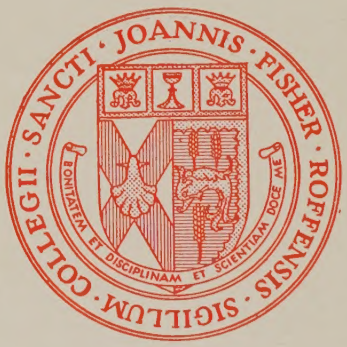

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TO

RAYMOND MORTIMER

PROUST

I

Du Côté de chez Swann, the first book of a long novel to be called *A la recherche du temps perdu,* was published by Bernard Grasset in 1913, at the author's expense, and fell as flat as a pancake. Probably there will be always enough unsuccessful authors to keep these two facts green in the public memory. In 1917 it was taken up by Gallimard of *La Nouvelle Revue Française,* and as at that time three at least of his regular contributors were friends of mine, it is impossible that before the end of that year I should not have heard the name of Marcel Proust. Not, however, till the spring of 1919 did I hold a copy of *Swann* in my hand; and then the introduction was contrived by a lady. She had fallen in love with the book and through the book with the author

—as ladies will; and I, instead of feeling grateful for having been brought acquainted with a masterpiece, felt jealous—as will men. I began reading *Swann*, not in hope of a new experience, but with a view to picking holes in a rival. In so Proustian fashion does the adventure open.

I began reading in a hypercritical, not to say cantankerous, frame of mind; and, as things have turned out, that was no bad beginning. Soon enough I was seduced. In my turn I fell, duly swept off my feet by that current which has floated so many of the more intelligent and sensitive of my contemporaries into oceans of uncritical enthusiasm. I went down before the revelation and wallowed. By 1925 Proust meant for me what seventy-five years earlier I suppose Balzac must have meant for people of my sort. Here was a contemporary possessing imaginatively and giving form to the vague, half-conscious experience of two generations; here was a path cut into an unexplored shrubbery of that back-garden men

call life; and here were the memoirs of my age. Also, it will be, I surmise, with Proust's contribution to experience as it has been with Balzac's: something will remain, something will be discarded, much will be lost. Today only the historically minded appreciate the shades by which Balzac differentiates "restauration" from "Louis-Philippe," and our grandchildren will hardly feel as we feel the delicate touches by which Odette is made to represent one epoch and Albertine to announce another. The most variegated periods tend, at a distance, to appear monochrome; wherefore one of Proust's most delicious gifts for us, his gift of rendering temporal colour, inevitably will cease to charm as the age of which he is the memorialist loses its bloom. Now because I began to read in a fault-finding spirit, because I have known what it is to feel definitely and ungenerously hostile, because there was a moment when I refused to surrender myself to the slightly vicious pleasures of actuality, I believe, or like to think, that I have had a

glimpse of this early twentieth-century masterpiece through the eyes of 1950. For instance, I can see that, though *A la recherche du temps perdu* will always mean to me more than any other long novel, that does not prove that it is more. *Clarissa*, *Tristram Shandy*, even *Jean Christophe*—which the French have put in the corner quite as much because it was written by a Protestant and a pacifist as because it is written in a woefully undistinguished manner—may each in its way be a match, and more than a match, for *La Recherche*: but none of them can be for us our masterpiece, our *temps retrouvé*. Nevertheless, an Edwardian who aspires to say something of general, and possibly permanent, interest about Proust must bear in mind the difference, must realise at all events that a difference there is, between the absolute and ephemeral qualities of a work of art—that the latter, though by no means negligible, are evanescent. One would wish to be sensitive to both.

After my conversion the adventure became

more Proustian than ever. It was a *ménage à trois*. Proust having become a part of two lives, an ingredient of a relationship, each new volume became an emotional event and the vagaries of his creatures matter for conversation, letters, post cards, telephonings, telegrams even. The book with its moods lived on through ours—gay, agitated, intense, cynical: not only did everything about it become of consequence, everything about the author became interesting. God forgive me, I tried to look at the drawings of Mlle. Lemaire: I re-read a few pages of Ruskin. And at last, drawing level with my accomplice, I met the master. It was at a supper-party after a first night of the ballet; and at half-past two in the morning up popped Proust, white gloves and all, for all the world as though he had seen a light in a friend's window and had just come up on the chance of finding him awake. Physically he did not please me, being altogether too sleek and dank and plastered: his eyes were glorious however. Though he was infinitely gracious, the call was not a suc-

cess. In paying Stravinsky a compliment he paid Beethoven a better: Ansermet failed to keep the peace: *ça finissait mal.* Still, I had seen Proust; there was fresh food for enthusiasm, something new to write home about, more to discuss.

How I talked! Have I friend or acquaintance whom I have not implicated in long and presumably tedious conversations about Proust and his ways? To boot I have read most of what has been written on the subject. Wherefore I warn those who do me the honour of reading this essay that sooner or later they are sure to hear some echo of their own voices, to come across some reminiscence of what they have read elsewhere. Does it matter? I herewith make all acknowledgements by renouncing all claim to originality. I have attempted to set in order impressions created or furbished by a re-reading of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and if I have succeeded I shall have written, I hope, something which to a few will be instructive and to a few more agreeable.

There my ambition ends. To creation or discovery I make no claim; I record impressions and speculations, many of which may have occurred to other readers, some of which certainly were suggested by other critics. I have tried to rationalise an emotional adventure; and, as must be the case ever, what of order and intelligibility the story has gained in the process will be set off by a loss of intensity.

II

When I began to read *Swann* the first fault on which I pounced was that of which any one, however unpouncingly disposed, is sure to complain at first. I complained that Proust was tedious. Tedious he is, but his tediousness becomes excusable once its cause is perceived. Proust tries our patience so long as we expect his story to move forward: that not being the direction in which it is intended to move. Novelists, as a rule, are concerned, to some extent at any rate, with getting on with their tale; Proust cares hardly more what becomes of his than did Sterne. It is in states, not action, he deals. The movement is as that of an expanding flower or insect. He exhibits a fact: we expect another to succeed it, effect following cause. Not at all: the fact remains suspended

while we watch it gradually changing its shape, its colour, its consistency. For fifty pages we watch the process; after which Proust proposes another fact, new and seemingly irrelevant. Because very often there is no progressive relation we have a sense of being thwarted. We are annoyed. Proust does not get forward, we complain. Why should he? Is there no other line of development in the universe?

This sense of weariness, born of continual checking and marking time, is aggravated by the fact that, at first reading, Proust's sentences seem unconscionably and unnecessarily long. For this, too, there is excuse, and good. In short sentences Proust could not have given his meaning. He hesitates, he qualifies, he withdraws a little even; partly because, politest of men, to him a peremptory affirmation seemed sheer bad manners, chiefly because his ruling passion was a passion for truth. Two thousand five hundred years of philosophy notwithstanding, truth is rarely absolute; that is why Proust's sentences are interminable. They are a

string of qualifications. For him short sentences would have been mere literature—words corresponding with no reality. His object was to tell the truth about life as he saw it; wherefore he intended originally to write a book without a single paragraph or chapter, so unlifelike—so unreal—did these arbitrary and convenient divisions appear. For the same reason he may have had a horror of full stops. He was to render his sense of life—of something which has relations in space, and is also, as he saw it, a mode of time. But time, he may have argued, is what the hymn says it is—an ever-flowing stream, not a ball of string cut into neat lengths. Time overflows punctuation. Also, how is a style to be anything but complicated and prolix when an artist is trying to say four things at once—to give a bird's-eye view and "a close up" at once in time and space?

I see an exquisite woman sweep into the ballroom, and, seeing from my end—the far end—of the room, get a vivid sense of a racing cutter close hauled. I approach, talk to her, and

perceive with the peering eye of a specialist that she is no longer young, that she is worn and repaired, that no longer a cutter she is an elegant but moss-grown ruin. Proust, perceiving *la belle* Madame X. sweep into the room, gets his shock of pure delight and at the same moment reacts to his knowledge that Madame is forty-five and has lived: simultaneously he reacts to the object and his knowledge of the object. Dichotomy for Proust is begging the question. It is a complete experience he pretends to give—his whole experience, as a whole, not in detail: that sort of thing cannot be done in the style of Voltaire. Wherefore, when we complain that Proust's sentences are unarchitectural, illogical and endless, let us add that not otherwise could he have said what he had to say, and that what he had to say had never been said before: that for Proust a golden sovereign was something altogether different from seven half-crowns, a shilling, two six-penny bits and half-a-dozen coppers: and that the nineteenth-century realists were much too fond of fobbing

us off with small change. If Proust was not a stylist after the manner of Flaubert, or of Gautier even, Proust had his reasons. And, in fact, he cared so much for the sound of his sentences that he would not use a foreign word or phrase—so at least one of his friends affirms —till he had made sure of the correct pronunciation. For if the rhythm depended on a mispronunciation, manifestly to an educated ear the sentence would be unrhythmical. It is characteristic of the artist, I think, that he should have written for the one just ear rather than for the nine hundred and ninety-nine.

It is customary to compare Proust, stylist and memorialist of his age, or at least to say that one will not compare him, with St. Simon. Certainly his style may be compared profitably with that of the seventeenth-century writers of whom St. Simon, for all that he wrote every word of his memoirs in the eighteenth and died in 1755, was one. Proust is comparable with the seventeenth-century writers in that his style may be considered periodic; and this is worth

noting because it may help us to understand the workings of Proust's mind when he sat down to express the truth that was in him. The period was invented by Thucydides and perfected by Demosthenes as a means of giving cohesion to the disjointed statements that tumble from the mouth of an unpractised narrator. "And I ran into the garden. And it was after breakfast. And I saw a strange dog. And he began barking. And Johnny began crying. And he had his new suit on. And I ran away. And he grabbed at me. And nurse had told him not to. And he fell down," says the child. "His breakfast eaten, my brother John, attired in a new suit, followed me, notwithstanding explicit injunctions to the contrary, precipitately into the garden; where, dismayed at the sight of a strange and vociferous animal, which caused even me to retreat, he, clutching wildly at my sash, fell flat on his nose . . ." says Demosthenes, making two periodic phrases coupled by an adverb out of nine unconnected, or very loosely connected,

statements. In the perfect period the sentence is neither grammatically complete nor perfectly intelligible till the last word has been given. The sign of a perfect period is the impossibility of placing a full stop, without making nonsense of the grammar, anywhere in the sentence before the close: "On being contradicted, to shout and scream, to beat on table with the butt-end of a beer bottle, menacing a blow with the hand disengaged, to kick under the cloth and spit in your neighbour's face, is the conduct neither of a gentleman nor a philosopher." This is perfect: the reader is kept in doubt as to the exact purport of the statement to the very last word, and at no point before the last is it possible grammatically to close the sentence. Such perfection, however, is rare. In what is called a periodic style there is no more than a tendency to keep the reader alert by modifying and qualifying the central idea by means of a series of dependent clauses, the relations of which one to another and to the principal verb will not become apparent till as late as possible. You may, if you

please, compare a periodic writer with a musician who as long as he decently can keeps back the resolution of his harmonies. Proust, like the seventeenth-century masters, is periodic: only, whereas the great prose writers of that age deal generally in general ideas, Proust is plaiting very particular strands of emotion and sensation experienced by a very definite individual, and experienced simultaneously. That is why the interminable dependent clauses, instead of following one another duckwise, go side by side, like horses driven abreast, and sometimes higgledy-piggledy like a flock of feeding starlings. A critic with sharper eyes than mine (could I remember who it was I would cite him by name) has pointed out that the recurring *que* of the seventeenth century becoming *soit que* in Proust (*that* becoming *whether* or *albeit*) is the symbol of a mind which tends to move to one side or even to take a half step back rather than go straight ahead. Proust composed in the periodic manner in that his meaning is often not revealed till the close, or near the close, of

the sentence. Often a careless or sleepy reader will find himself at the end of the sentence with a principal verb on his hands which he hardly knows what to do with. This shows that the period has been well sustained and that the periodic structure has served its purpose. He who would understand Proust must attend to every word he utters. This means stiff reading. Hence fatigue: hence also the revelation. I see no reason for supposing that Proust acquired his style by the study or imitation of other writers. Like all styles worthy the name it was an instrument developed gradually to serve the single purpose of self-expression; it is the nearest Proust can get in words to an equivalent for what Proust felt and thought and Proust's way of thinking and feeling. We laugh when it is suggested by a lady—by a duchess to be sure—that the literary style of Marcel Proust is a transcription of M. de Montesquiou's conversation. The style of Proust was the mind of Proust, which was sensibly different from that of M. le Comte. But is it much less fanciful to

suppose that Henry James was an influence? Proust hardly knew English. From his heroic effort to translate Ruskin he may have picked up something. But what is there common to Ruskin's verbiage and Proust's press of words—each corresponding to some twist or start of the mind? Rather the style of *La Recherche* seems to me a quite natural development—but what a development!—from the style of *Les plaisirs et les jours*: at its best it is the precise equivalent of the recaptured and detached experience of the author at his best. How simple art is!

In my jealous irritation I complained that Proust was not only tedious but clumsy. He is clumsy: again I was right, and again wrong in not seeing that as a rule he is clumsy in order to be something else. Proust's passion was for truth, the whole truth, the truth about oneself, the untold truth. "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" was his aesthetic creed; it usually is the creed of those who care more for truth than for beauty—albeit the coiner of the aphorism was of the other sort. Proust's aesthetic was

decidedly naïf—I shall have a word to say about it presently: here I want to insist only on the fact that, his passion being for truth, for truth naturally he would make any sacrifice, would sacrifice ease and elegance, consenting if necessary to be tedious and unlovely. He knew that he had something of the utmost importance to say, and he meant to say it and to say nothing less. There is ungainliness often and downright ugliness sometimes in his phrase, as there is almost always in the phrase of Balzac; which notwithstanding, Proust could write beautifully on occasion as I will prove by instances. Meanwhile, remember that the man who wrote those parodies could not be unaware of the ease with which a dexterous writer acquires *a style* instead of developing *style*; remember that he must have known better than most, better perhaps than any of his contemporaries, how easily literary technique can condition and control experience. He knew that to tamper with words is to tamper with sense; that to change the shape and sound of a sentence is to change its meaning:

and it was to the exact expression of his hideously complicated meaning—the expression of that and not a scruple more or less—that he devoted his uncompromising genius. It is well enough for a George Moore with nothing whatever in his head to devote such powers as many schoolboys possess to making paragraphs which express nothing but what most prurient schoolboys dream, and which reviewers still think lovely. Proust wanted to speak his mind and his was a mind not easily spoken.

Proust wanted to tell the truth as he knew it. He had a passion for the fact. And this pursuit of truth, of reality I had rather say, is the only begetter and conditioner of his style. It was the contemplation, the realisation, of facts which provoked the poet that was in him. He kept his eye on the object much as the great impressionists had done, he observed, he analysed, he rendered; but what he saw was not what the writers of his generation saw, but the object, the fact, in its emotional significance. And, like the impressionists, he has taught the

more sensitive of a new generation to see with him. I should like to quote two passages to show how naturally his reaction to material objects expressed itself in poetry. They are characteristic passages, which moved me intensely even when in my jealous fault-finding mood I read them first. Because Proust was an observer who analysed his experience his mind was full of abstractions; because he was a poet these abstractions were seeking ever to give themselves concrete forms. He burst into images, in other words he wrote poetry.

Mais ma grand'mère, même si le temps trop chaud s'était gâté, si un orage ou seulement un grain était survenu, venait me supplier de sortir. Et ne voulant pas renoncer à ma lecture, j'allais du moins la continuer au jardin, sous le marronnier, dans une petite guérite en sparterie et en toile au fond de laquelle j'étais assis et me croyais caché aux yeux des personnes qui pourraient venir faire visite à mes parents.

Et ma pensée n'était-elle pas aussi comme

une autre crèche au fond de laquelle je sentais que je restais enfoncé, même pour regarder ce qui se passait au dehors? Quand je voyais un objet extérieur, la conscience que je le voyais restait entre moi et lui, le bordait d'un mince liséré spirituel qui m'empêchait de jamais toucher directement sa matière; elle se volatilisait en quelque sorte avant que je prisse contact avec elle, comme un corps incandescent qu'on approche d'un objet mouillé ne touche pas son humidité parce qu'il se fait toujours précéder d'une zone d'évaporation. Dans l'espèce d'écran diapré d'états différents que, tandis que je lisais, déployait simultanément ma conscience, et qui allaient des aspirations les plus profondément cachées en moi-même jusqu'à la vision tout extérieure de l'horizon que j'avais, au bout du jardin, sous les yeux, ce qu'il y avait d'abord en moi, de plus intime, la poignée sans cesse en mouvement qui gouvernait le reste, c'était ma croyance en la richesse philosophique, en la beauté du livre que je lisais, et mon désir de me les approprier, quel que fût ce livre. Car,

même si je l'avais acheté à Combray, en l'apercevant devant l'épicerie Borange, trop distante de la maison pour que Françoise pût s'y fournir comme chez Camus, mais mieux achalandée comme papeterie et librairie, retenu par des ficelles dans la mosaïque des brochures et des livraisons qui revêtaient les deux vantaux de sa porte plus mystérieuse, plus semée de pensées qu'une porte de cathédrale, c'est que je l'avais reconnu pour m'avoir été cité comme un ouvrage remarquable par le professeur ou le camarade qui me paraissait à cette époque détenir le secret de la vérité et de la beauté à demi pressenties, à demi incompréhensibles, dont la connaissance était le but vague mais permanent de ma pensée.—*Swann*, i. 80.

Je m'arrêtais à voir sur la table, où la fille de cuisine venait de les écosser, les petits pois alignés et nombrés comme des billes vertes dans un jeu; mais mon ravissement était devant les asperges, trempées d'outremer et de rose et dont l'épi, finement pignoché de mauve et

d'azur, se dégrade insensiblement jusqu'au pied,—encore souillé pourtant du sol de leur plant,—par des irisations qui ne sont pas de la terre. Il me semblait que ces nuances célestes trahissaient les délicieuses créatures qui s'étaient amusées à se métamorphoser en légumes et qui, à travers le déguisement de leur chair comestible et ferme, laissaient apercevoir en ces couleurs naissantes d'aurore, en ces ébauches d'arc-en-ciel, en cette extinction de soirs bleus, cette essence précieuse que je reconnaissais encore quand, toute la nuit qui suivait un dîner où j'en avais mangé, elles jouaient, dans leurs farces poétiques et grossières comme une féerie de Shakespeare, à changer mon pot de chambre en un vase de parfum.—*Swann*, i. 114.

Proust's images were no lucky hits. On imagery he had meditated much and to the purpose. Metaphors he held the most effective means of expression; and he has shaken my admiration for Flaubert—which stands nevertheless—by pointing out with disconcerting

perspicacity and temperance how unfine, how commonplace, are his. In those illuminating notes on Flaubert's use of the imperfect in *oratio obliqua* and on his suppression of inverted commas, I discover, by the way, an image which seems worth catching and exhibiting so perfect a specimen is it of what an image should be: "donc, cet imparfait, si nouveau dans la littérature, change entièrement l'aspect des choses et des êtres, comme fait une lampe qu'on a déplacée." It is difficult to recall an image that throws a sharper or more helpful light into a dark corner. Proust meditated Flaubert strictly. They had things in common: for instance, a passion for verifying references (the passion for truth) and a habit of not always getting them right. Flaubert travelled to where Carthage was before writing *Salammbô*, and Proust, fearful of having misused a technical term in describing a fourteenth-century ornament, pestered Billy with interrogatory letters. But for the Flaubert-Maupassant doctrine—the doctrine that the artist should stand outside the work, observe

and record—Proust had no use at all. Facts, yes: he adored facts, but he would not leave them alone. Proust, the master commentator, the born showman, had no notion of standing aside. On the contrary, he rarely states a fact without commenting and criticising and reminiscing at enormous length, reminding one in this of another seventeenth-century master, of Bayle of the *Dictionnaire historique*, with his two lines of text to two pages of notes: also, in both cases, the notes are the better part. Proust's comment, *qua* comment, never jars: it displeases, when it does displease, because it is silly not because it is misplaced. No mere observer and recorder of facts, no Goncourt, but a psychologist writing out of himself, digging deeper, ever deeper, lowering his bucket to the very bottom of his own sub-consciousness, Proust brings nothing to the surface which is irrelevant to his subject. How should he, seeing that the subject of Proust's book is Proust?

Nevertheless, to return to my grumbling, Proust was clumsy. He can be grossly and, what

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is worse, unwittingly so. He could not leave out. Insignificant facts, platitudinous reflections, the obvious, the well worn, the thrice-told, all, all are set down beside what is stranger, subtler and truer than anything that has been set down in imaginative literature since Stendhal at any rate. Because he will not eliminate he is indiscriminate. He will treat facts as though he were a man of science rather than an artist. Indeed, in his way of piling instance on instance he reminds me sometimes of Darwin; also for piling thus high he has the man of science's excuse—he accumulates that truth may prevail. Proust was too profoundly in earnest not to be repetitious sometimes. Subtlest of analysts, subtlest of observers, he is not a subtle expositor. Far too much of what he says is redundant. Really he seems not to know which of his ideas and observations are surprising and which are trite. Occasionally his lack of finesse makes one positively uncomfortable, and his humour becomes so elephantine sometimes that one hardly knows which way to look. "Ainsi cette prosectomie (he

is describing the manager of the hotel at Balbec himself cutting up the turkey poult) donna-t-elle, comme la naissance du Christ ou l'Hégire, le point de départ d'un calendrier différent des autres, mais qui ne prit pas leur extension et n'égala pas leur durée."

Assuredly Proust had a sense of humour; but in his writings he was rarely witty, except of course in his parodies. In life he seems to have been delicious often. The Princess Antoine Bibesco once told me a story that redounds so pleasantly to the credit of his wit that I shall make bold to repeat it. Proust, who always was eager to be put right in matters of deportment and convention, had been taken to task by his friend, Prince Antoine, for talking about "de Musset." The *particule nobiliaire*, explained the prince, cannot stand first: you must say "Musset" or "Alfred de Musset" or "Monsieur de Musset." Proust kissed the rod, grateful though crestfallen. A few days later the prince, meeting Proust on his way home from a luncheon-party, asked whether there were any good

pictures in the house from which he came. "Pas grande chose," replied the chastened novelist, "et cependant il y a un beau portrait par ce peintre que vous appelez Dyk."

Another ill consequence of Proust's inability to eliminate is his way of running an idea to death. He cannot leave well alone. This habit of elongating and exaggerating is one of the two things that give an air of fantastic improbability to his narrative; the other, and far more important, is the extreme bizarrerie of his own character. You remember that scene at La Raspelière (*Sodome et Gomorrhe*, ii. 3. 15 *et seq.*) where Madame Verdurin, trying to work the hero into "le petit noyau," fears that he may be seduced by the Cambremers or others into a world that is not hers? Well, her diatribe lasts for eight closely printed pages. Thus:

J'ai entendu tout à l'heure que M. de Cambremer vous invitait à dîner. Moi, vous comprenez, cela m'est égal. Mais dans votre intérêt j'espère bien que vous n'irez pas. D'abord c'est

infesté d'ennuyeux. Ah! si vous aimez à dîner avec des comtes et des marquis de province que personne ne connaît, vous serez servi à souhait. . . . Vous ferez ce que vous voudrez. Ce que je peux vous dire: c'est excessivement malsain; quand vous aurez pincé une fluxion de poitrine, ou les bons petits rhumatisme des familles, vous serez bien avancé?

—Mais est-ce que l'endroit n'est pas très joli?—

Mmmmoniii. . . . Si on veut. Moi j'avoue franchement que j'aime cent fois mieux la vue d'ici sur cette vallée. D'abord, on nous aurait payés que je n'aurais pas pris l'autre maison parce que l'air de la mer est fatal à M. Verdurin. Pour peu que votre cousine soit nerveuse. . . . Mais du reste vous êtes nerveux, je crois . . . vous avez des étouffements. Hé bien! vous verrez. Allez-y une fois, vous ne dormirez pas de huit jours, mais ce n'est pas notre affaire. . . . Je ne sais pas du reste ce qui peut vous attirer à Rivebelle, c'est infesté de moustiques. Vous croyez peut-être à la réputation de la

galette. Mon cuisinier les fait autrement bien. Je vous en ferai manger, moi, de la galette normande, de la vraie, et des sablés, je ne vous dis que ça. Ah! si vous tenez à la cochonnerie qu'on sert à Rivebelle, ça je ne veux pas, je n'assassine pas mes invités, Monsieur, et même si je voulais, mon cuisinier ne voudrait pas faire cette chose innommable et changerait de maison. Ces galettes de là-bas, on ne sait pas avec quoi c'est fait. Je connais une pauvre fille à qui cela a donné une péritonite qui l'a enlevée en trois jours. Elle n'avait que 17 ans. C'est triste pour sa pauvre mère. . . . Vous viendrez avec votre cousine. C'est convenu. Bien. Au moins, ici, vous aurez tous les deux à manger. A Féterne c'est la faim et la soif. Ah! par exemple, si vous aimez les rats, allez-y tout de suite, vous serez servi à souhait. Et on vous gardera tant que vous voudrez. Par exemple, vous mourrez de faim. Du reste, quand j'irai, je dînerai avant de partir. . . . Aimez-vous les tartes aux pommes? Oui, eh bien! notre chef les fait comme personne. . . . Avec l'air d'ici, je prétends que je

guéris les incurables. . . . Et qu'est-ce que c'est que ce Robert de Saint-Loup dont vous parliez? . . . Vous pourriez plutôt l'amener ici. . . . Vous savez que si vous avez besoin de recommandations pour des examens . . .

and so on, I swear, through eight packed pages. As literature it is amusing enough for a page or two, after which it becomes a little disquieting. As representation it is absurd, which would not matter were it not so absurd as to smother in fantastical lights and shadows a scene which, up to that point, had given, and was intended to give, a sense of verisimilitude. And yet, can one deny that out of this extravagant fooling does emerge a distinct and highly comic image of *la patronne*, or that each page taken by itself is extremely funny? Is Proust perhaps only pushing his system of equivalents a little beyond the point to which I am able to follow him? Perhaps. All the same, eight closely printed pages! Jane Austen would have told us

as much or more in one. Miss Bates is never allowed to run on like that.

For all this tediousness, clumsiness, repetition and lack of discrimination blame Proust's passion—his strength and inevitable weakness—his passion for truth. It is odd to remember that throughout his youth this devoted servant of truth posed as a slightly frivolous aesthete and as such was accepted. There was something of Oscar Wilde about him. If he never walked down the rue de la Paix with a lily in his hand, habitually he went out to dinner with a camellia in his buttonhole, and in society affected a manner so exaggeratedly polite, sympathetic and ingratiating that his friends to define his peculiar attack coined the verb "proustifier." Had he died before the publication of *Swann*, he would have left the reputation of a drawing-room decadent. As an aesthete he haunted the salons: especially those of the adorable Madame Strauss and the impressive Princesse Mathilde—good hunting-grounds both for a future memorialist. He profited by his popularity. To know

Madame Strauss must have been a liberal education. She it was who, the first night of some opera or other, put Gounod, with his mania for saying incomprehensible things, in his place:

"Qu'en pensez-vous, cher maître?"

"C'est rhomboïdal."

"Ah, cher maître, j'allais le dire."

And Proust himself tells us how the princess, after trying in vain to dissuade her nephew from joining the Russian army, burst out—"Quelle obstination! Mais malheureux, ce n'est pas une raison parce que tu as eu un militaire dans ta famille. . . ." C'est déjá assez Guermantes.

Now this dabbler in the *beau monde* and the more civilised salons was, you must remember, accepted and admired, as a wit perhaps, as a charming human being doubtless, but chiefly as an aesthete. And the aesthetic of this remarkable aesthete seems to have amounted to this: Beauty is Truth—Ruskinian Pre-Raphaelism. But his aesthetic, which I had thought to make game of, suddenly I perceive does not matter; what does matter is his vision of truth and his means

of attaining it, both of which in his aesthete days were unrevealed. Before, however, considering his vision and his method, before coming to the kernel of my enquiry, I should like to find another fault or two.

Whatever we may think of Proust's aesthetic we cannot deny that he was the perfect aesthete in that for him art came first. Art and thought he set above all things: his detestation of Philistinism was, I suppose, what made him enthusiastic about Ruskin. Only he protests too much. We begin to feel uncomfortable when for the tenth time we have been given to understand that a minor poet is immeasurably superior to a marquis. We cannot help suspecting that he is beating down an innate propensity with an acquired. But when he insists on the duty of sacrificing life to art he is impressive because he is sincere. A few hours before he died—so far as I can discover the story is true—he called for the volume in which he describes the death of grand'mère, observing simply—"J'ai plusieurs rétouches à y faire." Art was Proust's last illu-

sion. Love he had seen through. Love is not enough. Art is. That is an illusion too. It is wiser to live for and by the aesthetic emotions than the personal because works of art do not change. It takes two to make a love-affair, whereas our aesthetic ecstasies depend on ourselves. Yes, but are we unchangeable? Are we constant? Are we permanent? Art can give joy as love can; but wake up one morning with a cold in your head or "feeling chilly and grown old" and see what has become of your raptures. No, *cher maître*, no happiness is permanent. Art outlasts love and the work of art outlasts the artist; but aesthetic sensibility, like everything else, is in the clutch of circumstance. It is a question of time, as you of all men should know.

One of my most comfortable grievances against Proust was that he was a snob. Admirers argue—and since I became an admirer I have myself been guilty of the sophistry—that because he scolded the upper classes he was not impressed by them. As if the most fervent

lovers of lords had not often been the Savonarolas of their age. It is claimed as a sign of his unsnobbishness—which it would not be even were it true—that he makes his smart people stupid. All I can say is I wish I more often met in the *beau*, or indeed in any, *monde* ladies as bright in the head as the Duchesse de Guermantes: "Je ne sais, déclara Oriane, si M. Esterhazy vaut mieux, mais il a un autre chic dans la façon de tourner les phrases, une autre couleur. Cela ne doit pas faire plaisir aux partisans de M. Dreyfus. Quel malheur qu'ils ne puissent changer d'innocent." When next you hear something better in Mayfair or Chelsea be sure to let me know. In his novel Proust manifests his contempt for the *mondains* and *mondaines* a little too conspicuously, and in his letters flatters and fawns on M. de Montesquiou a good deal too basely. None but a snob would have felt it necessary to rub it in so conscientiously: "Aussi, Mme de Guermantes dit-elle 'ce sera très intimidant' par simple bêtise, qui, chez les gens du monde, l'emporte encore sur la

vanité." As a matter of mere fact—and for Proust facts are not negligible—the *gens du monde* are no stupider than any one else. All classes, as classes, are as stupid as it is stupid to consider individuals as members of a class. Yes: Proust was a snob. And what does it matter? He was an artist of genius who has revealed an age to itself and has created something which possibly for a thousand years will have some value for people who think and feel. He happened to be a snob because, having a passion for society, he happened not to be a gentleman. He was for ever asking fine ladies, and astounding them by asking, how one should behave in the world; how one should take off one's hat, say "good-bye," kiss hands; asking who might meet whom and where, and who should take precedence: in fact he took lessons in deportment. Only a snob could have known the usages of society as Proust knew them, by study that is, not as one knows English but as a sixth-form boy knows Latin. Proust danced the round of fashion by mental application: he had no sense

of rhythm, his feet were in his brain, not on the floor. He liked—as Thackeray says we all should like—to be called "mon cher" by a duke; and I believe he would have been a little consoled for his asthma could he have known that one day M. le duc de la Rochefoucauld would write "qu'il (Proust) s'amusait du mot du prince Edmond de Polignac: 'Un tel? Il ne peut pas être intelligent, il n'est pas malade';" for Proust was an invalid and a snob.

III

To catch truth, truth as a whole, which is something different from the whole truth, to take the deep-sea monster alive, not to dissect the corpse, that was Proust's intention. External reality, at the very moment it is apprehended with the utmost intensity, and still more his own states of mind at that agonising moment when a state of mind has the force and certainty of a sensation, were his game. Above all he wanted to tell the truth about himself. Now though truth about oneself must be sought in the unplumbed depths of the subconscious, nothing of it can be apprehended, much less boxed for exhibition, till it has been fished up into consciousness. Only in consciousness can intellect bear on experience; and by intellect only can experience be made intelligible. This funda-

mental difficulty is recognised and stated emphatically by Proust's intellectual master, Bergson. Granted our data lie in dark, deep places impenetrable to the discursive intellect—lie, that is, below consciousness,—none the less only by intellect can data be handled. And intellect can handle only what has been brought into consciousness. Problem: how to bring data where intellect can get at them.

"Ce que nous avons senti, pensé, voulu depuis notre première enfance est là—writes Bergson —penché sur le présent qui va s'y joindre, pressant contre la porte de la conscience qui voudrait le laisser dehors." One of the many queer things about Proust was that his consciousness did not wish to leave the denizens of the subconscious without: on the contrary it was ever beckoning, going into the highways and hedges, compelling them to come in. Proust dragged the depths. He was the most resolute deep-sea fisherman that ever cast a net, and ultimately the most successful. By what arts did he draw these monsters from the deep?

Our sub-conscious, and for that matter our conscious, personalities are changing always. Of changes in the conscious we are more or less constantly aware: but of changes in the sub-conscious we become aware only when some monster who has been lying on the bottom, browsing and waxing fat, becomes on a sudden unbearably distended, swirls to the surface—into consciousness that is—and explodes: explodes with such violence that our neat conscious lives are more often than not blown to smithereens. To change the metaphor: something in the sub-conscious becomes as a cumulous cloud, absorbing and absorbing electricity, till at last the charge becoming excessive, the tension intolerable, the camel's back breaks and the electricity rushes to earth in one illuminating but devastating flash. Pangs of unwarranted emotion, unreasonable anxieties and anticipations, an unaccountable sense of expectation, suppressed excitement, goings home in unduly high or low spirits, a trivial conversation becoming disproportionately significant, an absence absurdly

disappointing, and then a startling query—"Do I really want to go to Paris next week?"—a drive home alone in a "taxi"—a flash—"Good God, I am in love." Or, because I will not have it that life is all pain, reverse the engines: the accretion in the sub-conscious of a thousand grains of dust and rust, each in itself imperceptible, and then, one fine morning, a sense of "life being so full of such wonderful things I am sure we should all be as happy as kings," of how pleasant to smoke a pipe and read *The Times*, of how gay to lunch in the garden, and how agreeable to spend a month pottering through Umbria with old Tom; up comes the monster with a swirl—"By God, thank God, I am out of it, I am out of love." Now alongside this spawning ground, this bed of immature monsters, lies another, a bed of comatose monsters, which is called the sub-conscious memory. And Proust, at last, came to be able to bring these monsters up from the deep at will almost and by the simplest devices. A surprise, the taste of a madeleine soaked in tea, the phrase of a

sonata by Vinteuil, the click of a lift as it passes a floor, the untying of a shoe-lace, the unbuttoning of an overcoat, such were the jolts that for him provoked explosion. *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a series of carefully planned explosions by means of which the submerged past is brought into the present, the deep-sea monsters of memory to the surface. The pursuit, capture and exhibition of these is the motive of the book.

In the last volume of his *opus* Proust has published his recipe for catching experience. It is a matter of some seventy pages, a brilliant performance, made ever so little ridiculous by his fancying that he is laying down the laws of artistic creation, whereas in fact he is merely emptying his own bag of tricks. Proust wants to render experience in all its intensity and vividness, at that throbbing moment when emotion has the force and reality of sensation. Now an emotional experience at its most intense and vivid, at the moment of being experienced, is uncapturable. Either it provokes simultane-

ously a practical response and, losing the name and nature of experience, becomes action; or it so agitates us that we are in no state to realise, circumvent, contemplate and analyse. Experience is blinding: how, then, should one portray it? Clearly, one must, if one can, disarm without disfiguring. Now in conscious memory experience as it grows old does certainly tend to lose its agitating and irritating qualities, but loses with them its iridescence and intensity,—its vitality in fact. It simply fades and falls to dust: conscious memory is a coffin. But hermetically sealed in the sub-conscious, experience surrounded by all her attendant circumstances lies like an entombed queen in all her gems and finery, her body perfect, her very expression vivid, the bloom unaltered on her cheek. She is not dead: she sleeps. She lives, but life has lost its sting. Immarcescible she lies, till exposed to light and air: yet unarmed, yet innocuous. A magician can awake her, but waking she must die. That is the true story of the sleeping beauty. Immarcescible till exposed, wilting on exposure,

she lies asleep in fullest vigour at the point of death. Yes, but there is an instant between the two states, an instant in which we can see her as she was, an instant of waking life between two sleeps. Could we but recapture a past experience, dragging it up from the depths of the sub-conscious, a past experience with all its glamour, its intensity, its reality clinging about it, but with its sting drawn, should we not stand a chance of seeing the monster whole and seeing him steadily? The monster we know can be brought to the surface; he can be brought to the surface by an appropriate shock. Proust's first gift, the gift that conditioned his method, was his capacity for giving himself shocks.

Given this shocking power, one who would create an equivalent for that spate of experience which we call life must acquire and store up below consciousness a hoard of experience. Proust was a great collector: you may say "observer" if you like, but the word seems to me inadequate. He packed his sub-conscious memory. No field-botanist, he did not make a her-

barium of desiccated specimens, but beewise extracted the essence of fields and trim gardens, converting the produce to his own ends. What he converted it to was something which, at the appropriate jolt, coagulated and came to the surface, a lively recollection and something more than a recollection. Not of facts and states of minds only was Proust an observer either: he collected situations. He had an eye for the individuals who compose a party and a sense of the party as a whole. Sometimes the monster he forces to light is his sense of a whole state of affairs. That is why he is the memorialist of his age.

Landed alive, but not kicking, how is the monster to be examined and described? That is where the psychologist and the artist come in. But how to prolong the instant of vitality, how to keep the experience alive till these have done their work? That is the question; that is the seemingly impossible feat. The experience is in the past. It can be remembered, but how is it to be realised? Realised it must be if it is to be

seen and described in all its intensity (sterilised and rid of its poison however)—if it is to be seen alive. This is where Proust's genius—and nothing less than genius of the highest order would have served—shows itself unmistakably. Proust brings the past into the present and makes it live there, the present being the only atmosphere in which for us anything can live; and this he does by creating a shape not in space but in time. Time is the stuff of which *A la recherche du temps perdu* is composed: the characters exist in time, and were the sense of time abstracted would cease to exist. In time they develop; their relations, colour and extension all are temporal. Thus they grow: situations unfold themselves not like flowers even but like tunes; and no one, nothing, is for two chapters the same. Nothing ends as it began. There is no absolute. Love, to take the obvious example: a million feelings, ten thousand incidents, and at the end you say "I have been in love." M. de Charlus is always going downhill; so, more slowly, is Swann, whose deterioration keeps pace

with his humiliation. One hardly notices that Saint-Loup changes completely thrice, so gradually and naturally does he change. Even Méséglise becomes Hill 307. So we roll, with this unhappy, ill-heated planet, through time, because the book is a fabric of time. And let me admit, at once, that, to create this temporal fabric, with time the artificer has taken the strangest liberties. He has shaped it to his ends. This bubble of present time which Proust has filled and coloured with a vision of the past is, with infinite precaution, blown out and distended indefinitely almost.

Proust deals with time as modern painters deal with space. The painter will not allow scientifically ascertained spatial relations and laws of perspective to restrict his imagination. And Proust in his first volumes does not hesitate to make the hero sometimes a child and sometimes a young man, or in his last to make Bloch take about a quarter of an hour to hurry into his place at a matinée *chez la princesse*. The movement is as that of the sea, waxing,

waning, mounting, swirling, breaking, changing sound and colour, retreating on itself: the same water always, variously conditioned. The form—it is foolish not to confess it—is vague: a holdall rather than a dressing-case. How comes it otherwise that, though the novel was begun before the war, the war is brought in and colours the last volumes? Also, do not try to establish a satisfactory chronology: events of a post-war complexion are made to take their place in nineteenth-century settings, and the sportive, contemporary Albertine, with her passion for motor-cars and interest in aviation, looks sometimes in her Fortuny velvets oddly like a friend of Albert-Édouard, Prince de Galles. That scene *chez la princesse,* in the last volume, cannot be placed earlier than 1932, since we are given to understand that fifteen years have elapsed since last we met some of the characters whom last we did meet towards the end of the war. And what a scene it is! What excruciating sense of flying time is imparted, when all the celebrities with whom we have

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grown bald and grey—the people who for Proust and for us have about them the glamour of fifteen volumes—are perceived to possess for the American *débutante* no more than their social value of the moment, when a generation has arisen for which the second Princesse de Guermantes is not the late Madame Verdurin!

A la recherche du temps perdu is a shape in time; it is not an arabesque on time. It is constructed in three dimensions, and may be described as architectural if we bear in mind that the blocks of which it is built are time-blocks. They are arranged in an order, conceived and determined by the architect with a view to expressing truth, which is not necessarily chronological order. Indeed, Proust cannot well arrange his blocks in sequence, since he is composing in mass. Better to think of the book as a picture—an oil-painting not a fresco—in time. Because one time mass stands before another in the composition it does not follow that it precedes it in history; for, like the modern painter dealing with space-masses,

Proust moves his hither and thither regardless of their chronological relations.

A la recherche du temps perdu is a record of change, an expression of becoming; and there are two passages in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* which might stand as mottoes on the first page of the first volume, so clearly do they forebode the author's preoccupation:

Les visages humains ne semblent pas changer au moment qu'on les regarde, parce que la révolution qu'ils accomplissent est trop lente pour que nous la percevions. Mais il suffit de voir à côté de ces jeunes filles leur mère ou leur tante, pour mesurer les distances que sous l'attraction interne d'un type généralement affreux ces traits auraient traversé dans moins de trente ans, jusqu'à l'heure du déclin des regards, jusqu'à celle où le visage, passé tout entier au-dessous de l'horizon, ne reçoit plus de lumière.

And this:

Pour être exact, je devrais donner un nom différent à chacun des moi qui dans la suite pensa

à Albertine; je devrais plus encore donner un nom différent à chacune de ces Albertines qui apparaissaient devant moi, jamais la même, comme—appelées simplement par moi pour plus de commodité la mer—ces mers qui se succédaient et devant lesquelles, autre nymphe, elle se détachait. Mais surtout de la même manière mais bien plus utilement qu'on dit, dans un récit, le temps qu'il faisait tel jour, je devrais toujours donner son nom à la croyance qui, tel jour où je voyais Albertine, régnait sur mon âme, en faisant l'atmosphère. . . .

Of course the problem is not so simple: for all his Bergsonism, or because of it, Proust was no philosopher. Grant that we run through a score of *egos* in a week, there is always one which we believe at any rate more real than the rest. I am living on a farm in a remote village by the Mediterranean with five of my oldest friends. We all try to work. We wear *espadrilles* and sweaters, wash once a day and shave twice a week. We talk as only people

who have known each other twenty years can talk; the charm that we find in each other's conversation depends rather on our knowledge and appreciation of each other's characters than on the intellectual import of what we say: we are very much ourselves you would suppose. Now if tomorrow the mayor of Marseilles were to invite me to an official banquet to meet M. le Préfet—and if I were to accept—a nicely brushed and French-speaking Clive Bell would present himself, and would be just as much me as the person who was smoking his pipe before the stove last night. I should not be playing a part. I should be myself. And if on my return I were to find in Cassis harbour the yacht of one of my more elegant acquaintances, if I were invited to dinner, if I donned a "smoking" and drank a cocktail and a glass or two of champagne, gossiping about the new *chef* at the Embassy and the latest bit of gate-crashing, still I should be as much myself as I was the day before yesterday. And yet I cannot help believing that there is a self more real than any of these;

the self that compares and criticises the others, the self that reviews with equal detachment last night's party and the party given a hundred and fourteen years ago which Lord Byron is describing in the letter I happen to be reading. Certainly that self seems more real; but it well may be, as Proust seems to have supposed, that this flattering conviction is another illusion. Philosophically, however, it is clear that there must be some permanent tube—call it personality or what you will—through which experience flows; for if there were not our experiences would not even appear to be connected. That we have the illusion—if illusion it be—of continuous experience does seem to imply some permanent experiencer. At times, I agree, the sense of continuity wears thin. When I am talking, as I was last night, with old friends about some event in Cambridge days, I can think of, and visualise, myself almost as if the undergraduate, Clive Bell, were another of those old friends, were some one other than my present self. But no; I am

aware that these remote things befell *me* in a way quite distinct from that in which I am aware that they befell *them*. To illustrate this theory of personality my friend, Leonard Woolf, has proposed a pretty image which I propose to borrow. Personality he likens to a thread from which depend beads, which beads are our various selves. Some are so tightly attached to the thread that hardly can they be detached—such is the high-thinking, low-living self that is slopping about the vineyards of Cassis in *espadrilles:* others—the self, for instance, that was the life and soul of a tipsy carouse last Wednesday—are so loosely attached that with the greatest ease they can be disengaged, reviewed and laughed at by the more permanent self. I know not what Proust would have said to this.

A lady once compared the individual as conceived by Proust with a cloud of midges blown hither and thither by the wind. The image is extraordinarily happy. The wind, I take it, is some force working on the subconscious; and

the worst of it is we never know what the subconscious is up to till some monster of its contriving swims into consciousness. We believe that we are happily in love with A and all the time is growing up a passion for B. Some day this passion will come to the surface and explode with such violence as to blow the cloud of midges in all directions. The cloud will re-form again in an entirely new shape probably—A and B alike having played their parts and passed on to new catastrophes; but the only way in which we can be made to see the stealthy gathering of the storm, the disintegration after explosion, and the gradual re-formation, is by applying the method of the slow-motion picture. And that is what Proust does. He juggles with time. And with time he can juggle because time is the material in which he works.

Proust saw human beings as clouds of midges floating in time, ever changing, ever becoming, never still. Bergson was his master and—as you may or may not care to know—his relation by marriage: also a student of Proust might do

worse than read a little Bergson, though to understand *La Recherche* such studies are not, as some Bergsonians have supposed, necessary. It is necessary only to realise that the form of the novel is a shape in time, and that the author has exploited all those possibilities of acceleration and slowing down of which film-producers so far have made so little or such lamentable use. Just now we caught him meditating Flaubert's management of the imperfect; in that same essay he tells us that Flaubert was "le premier qui a mis le temps en musique" and goes on to praise "un blanc" in *L'Éducation sentimentale* which signifies a lapse of ten years. A sense of the lapse of time and of time's ineluctable triumph was ever present to the author of *A la recherche du temps perdu,* at once agitating and consoling, and moving him so profoundly that on occasions it could make him dramatic. An author who deals in states, not actions, will not be that often or for nothing: but Proust is dramatic, subtly and unostentatiously, when he allows us suddenly to become aware that the

new Princesse de Guermantes is the old Madame Verdurin; Swann's urbane announcement of his death-sentence is more obviously and less effectively dramatic: and it is painfully dramatic when, from the corner of the railway-carriage, Albertine, simply by pronouncing the name of Mlle. Vinteuil, transports the hero (whom we may call "Marcel Proust" since Proust at long last so calls him) back to a scene witnessed at Combray surreptitiously and long ago, reawakening at once passion and jealousy. In Proust's opinion that was the best thing he ever wrote. Also, it is this sense of the passage of time which gives dramatic poignancy to that scene towards the end of the penultimate volume where M. de Charlus, grown old and imbecile almost, salutes Mme. de Sainte-Euverte in the Champs-Élysées.

Proust was the most self-conscious of men. He was acutely aware of himself as a human microcosm; he was—I must say it—an introspective psychologist. At the same time he was aware of himself as an observer living

and moving in the thick of phenomena, which is what makes him the St. Simon of his age. His psychology can hardly be over-praised, but it is the easiest thing in the world to over-praise psychology. Psychology is not the most important thing in the literary or any other art. On the contrary, the supreme masterpieces derive their splendour, their supernatural power, not from flashes of insight, nor yet from characterisation, nor from an understanding of the human heart even, but from form—I use the word in its richest sense, I mean the thing that artists create, their expression. Whether you call it "significant form" or something else, the supreme quality in art is formal; it has to do with order, sequence, movement and shape: it is purely aesthetic; let Aeschylus, Sophocles, Dante, Racine (who understood the human heart, however) and Milton bear witness. Shakespeare, to be sure, was a psychologist, but then Shakespeare was everything. And that grandest significance,—the significance which corresponds with a reality other than the reality

of this world of our sorrow, that beauty which makes the Aeschylean trilogy or *Samson Agonistes* more moving than any analysis of feeling —Proust lacks.

Of course Proust was an artist; only he was not the greatest kind of artist. He gives us little or nothing that life would not give if only we could press life hard enough. If you care for paradoxes you may say that Proust was a story-teller, a poet story-teller, a Chaucer, an Ariosto, a Crabbe; only his stories are about things which no one ever told stories about before. Primarily he is an observer and a psychologist. Now a psychological artist (I am not going to pay Behaviourism the compliment of taking it seriously) must depend on his own experience: none but himself can he know well enough for his purpose. He must write out of himself. The profound and complicated spiritual states analysed and described in *La Recherche* are the author's own; only the secondary characters are constructed from external observation. Françoise, to take the glaring ex-

ample, is a purely observed character: in her there is nothing of Proust. Yet by piling up acute and humorous notes he has constructed a character as lively, though not so interesting, as the hero himself or Swann: Sir Andrew Ague-cheek and Mr. Justice Shallow are as much alive as Hamlet. I think we may take it for certain that neither in the *Qedipus rex* nor in *Samson Agonistes* is there much direct drawing on the author's private adventures, though of course the content of both is conditioned by the author's sense of life: there is no Hamlet, no Adolphe, no Renée, no Childe Harold, no Swann. By whatever mysterious power Sophocles and Milton move us, assuredly it is not by the communication of an unpublished human document. But I would not have you suppose that I underrate the part played by art in a great psychological work such as Proust's. Theoretically, any intelligent disciple of Freud should be equipped to write a psychological novel, and if novel-writing were a science and not an art, doubtless the novels of psycho-analytically minded au-

thors would be less unreadable than they usually are. But to deduce from ten thousand particular experiences a general law, which may or may not be true, is to create nothing; creation begins when you give a particular form to a particular experience. Both the hero and Swann are expressions of Proust's experience: so no doubt is Charlus—of another layer of experience, a layer shot and broken with bizarrerie. And it is this fundamental bizarrerie which gives to several of Proust's characters, especially when they are profoundly agitated as they almost always are, a certain extravagance which amounts to unreality the moment the reader begins to imagine them in a normal atmosphere. Thus that scene of jealousy, where M. de Charlus, to recall Morel (who left him but a minute or two ago), sits down at a café and writes a note in which he recounts a cock-and-bull story of being about to fight a duel, will appear silly to any one who happens not to be living wholly in the world of Proust's invention. On the other hand, when he does not mis-

take his own eccentricity for the way of the world, Proust can be miraculously subtle without being disconcerting. That lovely description of a state of mind, of the hero's anxious longing for Albertine to return and compose a quarrel with an affectionate good-night, poised in equilibrium against his childish longing for like reassurance from his mother, convinces, no matter what the reader's mood, and achieves without effort universal validity. And this is true of Proust's psychology in general. Also, when we remember how much of his experience came to him through the distracted temperament of an invalid imprisoned by asthma we need not be surprised if his psychology—his analysis of experience—sometimes takes on an air of extreme fantasticality, and this at moments when his self-penetration is at its deepest. It is worth noting, I think, that, to me at any rate, those characters which Proust constructed from impersonal observation—Françoise, Madame Verdurin, La Duchesse de Guermantes, Cottard, Brichot, M. de Norpois—seem to live more comfortably

outside the book than those he drew from himself; while a third class of beings (Albertine, Gilberte), brought into the picture not so much for their own emotions as to provoke emotion and commotion in others, without the book seem hardly to exist at all. The unconvincingness of Albertine, however, may be due rather to the fact that Proust seems never to have known quite whether the character was a girl or a boy. For the rest, remark—for it is the sign of a master psychologist, not to be found in the works of a Molière or a Ben Jonson—that Proust never gives us a generalisation for an individual. He does not present "a lover," he describes Swann in love—Swann wishing to live long enough only to know the happiness of not being in love with Odette—a master stroke of psychology that.

An opinion is held—why, unless it has something to do with the title of the book, I cannot tell—that Proust was interested only in the past. In fact he was passionately interested in all that was going on beyond the cork-lined walls of his

room. The past had for him the advantage of having shed that stunning power which makes the present unmanageable; but the present, which becomes the past soon enough, was, albeit unsterilised and still unfit for art, raw material. Proust wanted to know what was going on. He wanted to know what the young were writing and painting, he tried to understand the most abstruse thought of his age. Not only was he the first to read the last Cocteau and Giraudoux, he struggled with Einstein and Freud. To the end of his days he was in the movement. As we may infer from the preface he wrote for *Propos de peintre* and from the correspondence arising out of that preface, M. Jacques-Emile Blanche became for him a thing of the past about the time that Mr. Aldous Huxley, whom in *La Recherche* he names and nicely distinguishes from his even more illustrious grandfather, became an actuality. For him nothing was intrinsically insignificant. The idlest contemporary gossip, the most trivial *nouvelles à la main*, might be made as appetising as a fine slice of thirty-

year-old scandal. He observed banalities after the manner of his beloved Impressionists, staring at familiar objects till they gave up their secrets, till he had penetrated the dust and dirt of familiarity and discovered underneath that thrilling reality which is the thing itself. And it was this fixed stare, concentrated on people and things, which revealed to him, as it had revealed to them, the poetry of the world in which he lived. To poetry we have seen him moved by a bundle of asparagus: listen to him now inspired, first by the telephone, then by the shock of seeing clearly and disinterestedly a human being too long taken for granted. The two passages should enable us to form a fair idea of his powers of observation—observation of himself and of others, of familiar objects and of states of mind—and of his power of converting to poetry what he observed.

Nous n'avons, pour que ce miracle s'accomplisse, qu'à approcher nos lèvres de la planchette magique et à appeler—quelquefois un peu trop

longtemps, je le veux bien—les Vierges Vigilantes dont nous entendons chaque jour la voix sans jamais connaître le visage, et qui sont nos Anges gardiens dans les ténèbres vertigineuses dont elles surveillent jalousement les portes; les Toutes-Puissantes par qui les absents surgissent à notre côté, sans qu'il soit permis de les apercevoir: les Danaïdes de l'invisible qui sans cesse vident, remplissent, se transmettent les urnes de sons; les ironiques Furies qui au moment que nous murmurions une confidence à une amie, avec l'espoir que personne ne nous entendait, nous crient cruellement: "J'écoute"; les servantes toujours irriteés du Mystère, les ombrageuses prêtresses de l'Invisible, les Demoiselles du téléphone!—*Côté de Guermantes*, i. 120.

Hélas, ce fantôme-là, ce fut lui que j'aperçus quand, entré au salon sans que ma grand'mère fût avertie de mon retour, je la trouvai en train de lire. J'étais là, ou plutôt je n'étais pas encore là puis-qu'elle ne le savait pas et comme une femme qu'on surprend en train de faire un

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ouvrage qu'elle cachera si on entre, elle était livrée à des pensées qu'elle n'avait jamais montrées devant moi. De moi,—par ce privilège qui ne dure pas et où nous avons pendant le court instant du retour, la faculté d'assister brusquement à notre propre absence—il n'y avait là que le témoin, l'observateur, en chapeau et manteau de voyage, l'étranger qui n'est pas de la maison, le photographe qui vient prendre un cliché dès lieux qu'on ne reverra plus. Ce qui, mécaniquement, se fit à ce moment dans mes yeux quand j'aperçus ma grand'mère, ce fut bien une photographie! Nous ne voyons jamais les êtres chéris que dans le système animé, le mouvement perpétuel de notre incessante tendresse, laquelle avant de laisser les images que nous présente leur visage arriver jusqu'à nous, les prend dans son tourbillon, les rejette sur l'idée que nous nous faisons d'eux, depuis toujours, les fait adhérer à elle, coïncider avec elle. Comment puisque le front, les joues, de ma grand'mère, je leur faisais signifier ce qu'il y avait de plus délicat et de plus permanent dans son esprit,

comment, puisque tout regard habituel est une nécromancie et chaque visage qu'on aime le miroir du passé, comment n'en eusse-je pas omis ce qui en elle avait pu s'alourdir et changer, alors que même dans les spectacles les plus indifférents de la vie, notre œil, chargé de pensée, néglige, comme ferait une tragédie classique, toutes les images qui ne concourent pas à l'action et ne retient que celles qui peuvent en rendre intelligible le but. Mais qu'au lieu de notre œil ce soit un objectif purement matériel, une plaque photographique, qui ait regardé, alors ce que nous verrons, par exemple, dans la cour de l'Institut au lieu de la sortie d'un académicien qui veut appeler un fiacre, ce sera sa titubation, ses précautions pour ne pas tomber en arrière, la parabole de sa chute, comme s'il était ivre ou que le sol fût couvert de verglas. . . . Et, comme un malade qui ne s'était pas regardé depuis longtemps, et composant à tout moment le visage qu'il ne voit pas, d'après l'image idéale, qu'il porte de soi-même dans sa pensée, recule en apercevant dans une glace, au milieu d'une

figure aride et déserte, l'exhaussement oblique et rose d'un nez gigantesque comme une pyramide d'Égypte, moi pour qui ma grand'mère c'était encore moi-même, moi qui ne l'avais jamais vue que dans mon âme, toujours à la même place du passé, à travers la transparence des souvenirs contigus et superposés, tout d'un coup, dans notre salon qui faisait partie d'un monde nouveau, celui du temps, celui où vivent les étrangers dont on dit "il vieillit bien," pour la première fois et seulement pour un instant car elle disparut bien vite, j'aperçus sur le canapé, sous la lampe, rouge, lourde et vulgaire, malade, rêvassant, promenant au-dessus d'un livre des yeux un peu fous, une vieille femme accablée que je ne connaissais pas.—*Côté de Guermantes*, i. 125.

Remark the observation at once of a state of mind and of the visual world; remark the reluctance to place a full stop, the sentences flowing on and following the very stream of thought; and do not fail to remark that the

whole passage is a block of, not an arabesque on, time.

Proust must have been acutely conscious of himself, at once as actor and observer in what is called "the real world," as well as in the world of his invention. So acute was his sense of that invented world and at the same time so critical, so vivid and historical his manner of rendering it, that reading his fiction one has a sense of reading memoirs. One catches oneself wondering to what history or book of reference one should turn to verify a date or collect a few biographical details. One goes beyond what is given, drawing inferences, for all the world as though it were a record of fact one were following. To this day I am unable to think of M. de Charlus as anything but a man I should have loathed or to refrain from rejoicing naïfly in his discomfiture *chez les Verdurins*. Reading Proust is living in a set—in several sets—which nevertheless one can study from outside, a door being kept wide open always on a larger world. With the people in Swann's set or the Verdurins' one

is acquainted as with the inhabitants of Walpole's letters or the Goncourt journals. When the Princesse d'Orvillers, excusing herself for arriving late, exclaims, "Ah! j'ai un tel regret! Mais vraiment il n'y a pas la possibilité matérielle . . ." one does not need to be told that she has been getting in with the Guermantes. By her tricks of speech one would recognise the duchess if one had the luck to fall in with her at a party. And just as every scrap of gossip about people one knows well—be they known to one in life or, like Byron, Voltaire, Dr. Johnson, Flaubert, the Duke of Wellington, through letters, memoirs and biographies—becomes of absorbing interest, so is one interested in tittle-tattle about Proust's people. That is the art of the memorialist. It comes of being alternately in the thick of life and a little outside, far enough outside to take a detached view sometimes. In his penultimate volume Proust parodies the Goncourt journals, chiefly I think to show the power of literature to make life significant. Be sure, he seems to say, that the conversations

which in these records enthrall you were in fact neither more nor less memorable than the conversations you hear every day. It is the art of the memorialist that makes the difference.

Need I add that these sixteen volumes, in so far as they are memoirs, are memoirs of a world of the artist's imagination, that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is not a *roman à clef?* I suppose so since there are still people to assert the contrary. Indeed, at this moment, there is a young gentleman hurrying about the streets of Paris, easily to be encountered in bars and *bals musette*, who will find you a name familiar to all readers of *Le Figaro* for almost every well-sounding name in the book; which is the more to his credit in that he has neither frequented the faubourg nor read the novel. It is he and his like who periodically produce authentic letters from the master addressed, I need hardly say, to the veritable Albert. They are just what such letters should be—that is of a satisfying indecency. I had the curiosity to collate one, which was for sale, with some letters from Proust to an emi-

nent author who happened to be his intimate friend; and I swear the handwritings were as dissimilar almost as are italic and roman characters. For the benefit of pious and rich admirers I may say there are hundreds of such precious documents in circulation. They will find appropriate resting-places no doubt in the collections of American millionaires and English homosexuals.

Proust, like most novelists, drew on his acquaintances for personal peculiarities, tricks of speech and gesture, oddities of dress and deportment—characteristics in fact: like all artists, he never took photographs and palmed them off as portraits. There never was an Albertine any more than—before their authors created them—there was a Clarissa or a Mimi Pinson. But there will be. Nature, female nature especially, follows art—not always in its happiest manifestations. The Pre-Raphaelite movement spawned Burne-Joneses and Rossetti girls galore, and Paris today is afflicted with a plethora of Van Dongens: Picasso's *grosses femmes*

have yet to come into their own. As for keys, Proust confided to M. Jacques de Lacretelle that the "petite phrase" de Vinteuil was put into his head by a phrase in a piano and violin sonata of Saint-Saëns', and that at different times he had associated it with phrases by César Franck, Wagner (Lohengrin), Schubert and Fauré, so the Proustian key-collector you perceive will need capacious pockets. As a matter of fact, and that Mr. Gossip may not be altogether defrauded, I will here betray, since the chapter has been long and arduous, a secret of palpitating interest. Proust has let fall in his book the names of several living persons: *signalons,* le marquis du Lau, le comte Louis de Turenne, la princesse de Wagram. I suppose I must have read this somewhere or other, but it is the best I can offer.

IV

"I SUPPOSE it may amuse your friends," said a bright young barbarian out for information, "to be told that Proust's book is a shrimping party in the sub-conscious, and that his catch is landed in a net which is a tissue of time. You have friends like that I know, and I dare say they're glad to hear that he collected experience by observation, analysed it by psychology and expressed it in poetry. But what I asked you to tell me was—what's it all about? Change and decay, you answer. So be it. But couldn't you—in your own simple words—give me the plot?"

"The plot . . . the plot, my dear . . . what is the plot? What is the plot of *La divina commedia* or Shakespeare's sonnets or *Tristram Shandy* or *Ecclesiastes?* Also of what use are rhetorical questions of this sort to bright young

barbarians? On you they are lost, and so perhaps is the art of Proust. I wonder."

Fundamentally stupid people will never enjoy *A la recherche du temps perdu*, though fundamentally stupid people with a taste for being in the movement must admire. Proust is not for the stupid, neither for the altogether unlettered perhaps, assuredly not for the insensitive. He is not for the didactic, not for those who would be forever giving a lesson, or receiving one with a view to regiving; neither is he for those who seek in art the glorification of their thick little egos. Proust is not for Mr. D. H. Lawrence. Neither for the slow-witted, nor the dull-witted, nor the self-complacent is he. Nor does any one who is quite sure that he has got hold of the right end of the stick stand the smallest chance of appreciating this delicate sceptic who is far from sure that there is a right end to get hold of, and by no means confident that there is any stick at all. Also I sometimes wonder whether Proust is for those who have no French. I hope he is, and Mr. Scott-Moncrieff

has done wonders. But though it sounds a little absurd to call an exquisitely civilised French Jew "racy," that is just what Proust's writing is. Proust is as racy as Chardin or Watteau in his way. This strangely un-French prose of his is saturated with references to French civilisation, French habits of thinking and feeling, French tricks of speech, French sentiment, convention, history, politics, art and letters, yes and to French agriculture and industry, to French gardening, cookery and shops, to all that is characteristically French. And I sometimes wonder whether this delicate flavour can be extracted from a French dish to season an English. I am not sure, though certainly I hope that it can be; and if it can, certain I am that Mr. Scott-Moncrieff is the predestined chef. But bright young barbarians generally know French and are apt to be neither stupid nor insensitive (let the incredulous elect and the Philistines consult Matthew Arnold who, after all, invented the nicknames and defined them); unlettered—God help them—they are, but neither

didactic nor self-complacent: so what is the plot?

There is none. The book is static. People and things exist for their own sakes or, if you will, to be explored, are no part at any rate of dramatic development or narrative. Situations arise only to give people and things opportunities of revealing themselves. The hero of this novel is time, the heroine the sub-conscious. "Yes . . . but . . ." queries my barbarian, growing conciliatory, "there is something more helpful than that to be said. Surely you know the sort of thing I want. I can't believe that all these fine fancies float about in the air. Even if there be no plot there are pegs, and a row of them." Well, I admit there is a row of pegs. Do you want to hear about it really?

A la recherche du temps perdu is, then, if you please, the story of three passions, two grand and one extravagant: the last serving as foil to the two first, besides expressing the fantastical side of the author's temperament. There is Swann's passion for Odette, the hero's

passion for Albertine, and the Charlus-Morel imbroglio; and, subsidiary to these: the hero's —Marcel's—passion for Gilberte (child-love and child-lasciviousness), for Madame de Guermantes (calf-love), for Mlle. Stermaria (whom he desired for a moment). Furthermore there are St. Loup's unhappy liaison with Rachel, and the much-enduring, faintly nauseous, business between M. de Norpois and Madame de Villeparissis. This last, by the way, is the one completely successful love-affair in the sixteen volumes if permanence be reckoned essential to complete success.

The work opens with *Du côté de chez Swann* (2 vols.), which, at first reading, it is impossible to appreciate fully. Inevitably one is distressed, at the beginning especially, by the style, by those perplexed coils of dependent clauses which, instead of locking into each other as links in a chain, advance tentatively shoulder to shoulder or higgledy-piggledy. Inevitably one is wearied by the method of going round an object, a scene or a state of mind, and describing it in minutest

detail from every conceivable angle. Should it remind you of Marivaux, particularly of that scene in the second part of *Marianne* where the heroine stumbles and sprains her ankle and simultaneously falls in love with Valville, you may even ask impatiently why the author cannot deliver himself as a man of this (the eighteenth-century) world, lucidly, elegantly. For naturally it is at the beginning of the first book that the novelty offends most. Certainly to my recollection the sentences seem longer and more tortuous in *Swann* than in the later volumes; yet they are not really so, I believe.

Well, if Marivaux does seem less fatiguing than Proust, partly no doubt that is because he was a more accomplished man of letters, chiefly because he had something infinitely less difficult to say. There is no comparison, though occasionally there is a curious similarity. Like Marivaux, Proust is never in a hurry; so leisurely is he that the full import of a scene or incident will not be made apparent sometimes till several volumes after it occurred. Thus, at first reading, one

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misses the fun of M. de Charlus scandalising the country neighbours by his marked attentions to Madame Swann; neither does one appreciate till volumes later the importance of little Proust's spying on the singular loves of Mlle. Vinteuil and her friend. These two first volumes are conditioned by Swann's miserable passion for Odette, which begins at a party and ends at a party—ends when he realises, *chez* Madame de Ste. Euverte, that he can hear *la petite phrase* without emotion. Nevertheless he is bullied into marrying his old mistress, who, by the way, dominates the book quite as much as her keeper. Indeed it is she who, stepping from her carriage and taking a turn at the *Rond Point*, epitomises, once and for all, Proust's sense, and henceforth ours, of the pre-war third republic, —of "the third republic" I had almost written, for post-war France seems more like a *troisième* empire. These two first volumes, besides the tale of Swann's passion and despair, contain descriptions of provincial life in the Ile de France, of country ways and days, of Parisian society, and

of a sensitive boy's heart, which make them unique in literature. Not till I read the two last did I think to meet their match.

Swann is still to the fore in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (3 vols.); indeed a sense of his presence does not fade from the book till, towards the end of *Le Côté de Guermantes*, he announces his approaching death. But now Albertine and M. de Charlus come on the scene, and with them falls the shadow of Sodom and Gomorrha. This book I consider definitely inferior to its predecessor. Too often one becomes aware through no fault of one's own that it is very long indeed. Marcel's passion for Albertine, like Swann's for Odette, is unquestionably the equivalent of a real experience; only most likely Albertine was a boy. And this confusion of sexes gives sometimes an air of unreality, not to the attendant circumstances only, but to the feelings themselves. This strain of unreality in the Albertine affair increases as the affair develops. There are, later, moments of dolorous passion vividly registered and

rendered as truly as words can render such things; but there are pages and pages reading which one feels sure that the author is recapturing one experience and describing another. So let us hurry on to *Le Côté de Guermantes* (1½ vols.), and *Sodome et Gomorrhe, i. and ii.* (3½ vols.), in which we get, at first, some respite from all shattering passion; where we are allowed to enjoy the memorialist at his best, and where we begin to long for that volume of Proustian biography which I understand is even now preparing.[1] Here is a brilliant dinner-party (*Côté de Guermantes*) *chez la duchesse*, and an astonishing evening party (*Sodome et Gomorrhe*) *chez la princesse*, both of which take far longer to describe than any party could possibly last. Proust is shaping time to his ends. Near the beginning comes the visit to St. Loup in garrison at Doncières; while through the whole five volumes runs the fantastic Charlus-Morel affair which I, at any rate, decline to take tragically. Here—we are well into *Sodome*

[1] Since published: *Répertoire par Charles Daudet.* (N.R.F.)

et Gomorrhe now—comes the second visit to Balbec, with fine doings at La Raspelière, the best fun in the sixteen volumes, unless you choose to reserve that praise (I shall not quarrel with you if you do) for the excursions of Brichot and M. de Norpois into patriotic journalism: here the egregious Cottard is at the top of his absurdity: and here we come to know, without ever ceasing to admire, the discreet Aimé and the singular M. Pierre de Verjus. All this is pure delight; but already at the end of that party *chez la princesse* the note of grievous passion has rung again, and we get the scene—and what a scene it is!—that scene of early jealousy: midnight, and Marcel at the telephone waiting for Albertine to ring up. And what another scene, volumes later, in *Albertine disparue*, when the Duc de Guermantes, by reminding Marcel of his ill-concealed agitation on that occasion, causes him to realise suddenly and simultaneously what his passion was and what it is—something as cold as yesterday's uneaten porridge and as unappetising. Then, at the very end

of this block of five enthralling volumes, up swirls the horridest monster of Proust's contriving—visual jealousy. Sitting in the railway-carriage, fancying himself cured of his *béguin* and about to break with Albertine for good, Marcel learns by accident of her connection with the Vinteuil set—with Gomorrha: up from sub-conscious memory rushes the monster (a vision with Albertine in Mlle. Vinteuil's place) which, exploding, sets in motion that indescribable dance of torment which, nevertheless, is described in *La Prisonnière.*

La Prisonnière consists of two volumes devoted to a study of jealousy in its minutest and most painful details. Though full of astonishing things it is tedious undeniably. The agony is over-prolonged, the ecstasies of torture are superabundant. More, I think, than anywhere else does the abnormality of the author's temperament and the confusion of sexes produce an air of unreality in these hectic pages. Had Proust known how to leave out he would have made a better job of it. Much of the psychology, when

not fanciful, is frankly naïf and could have been dispensed with. And yet, as an exhibition of the passion of love, of one aspect of it, *La Prisonnière* is unique—I use that odious word again because it happens to be the right one,—and it is noteworthy that so striking was its effect on the public that the title was borrowed a year or two later to make a catchpenny appeal for a rubbishy play in the Lesbian mode. Proust understood love, could realise that it was love, only when the passion was thwarted and devastating. In this he inherits a peculiarity of the greatest of French masters, of him who of Frenchmen has best understood and most grandly expressed the miseries of the human heart, of Racine. For, as M. Mauriac has pointed out, when Racine is portraying happy lovers—Junie, Atalide—he is tepid and commonplace; it is Phèdre, Hermione, Roxane, who illuminate the eternal theme. One might say that as, for M. de Polignac, a person could hardly be intelligent unless he were sickly, so for Proust one could not be in love unless one

were miserable: for him love was a congeries of sentiments, emotions and incidents, mostly painful, mostly ill, leading inevitably to disillusionment, to be dissipated only by death.

Albertine disparue (2 vols.) is a sketch, a mere series of notes more or less competently tacked together by the editors. Certainly Proust read them in proof, but then Proust treated proofs as most authors treat their first rough draft. Often one comes on passages as highly finished as anything in the sixteen volumes, followed by passages which are no more than memoranda. For instance, throughout the work, from the very first chapter of *Swann*, runs *leit-motif*-wise the word *"Venise,"* and sure enough in *Albertine disparue* Proust gets his hero to Venice. Here is matter for a couple of fascinating volumes; and all we are given is that memorable glimpse of Marcel trying to be firm in his intention of staying, sitting listening to some one playing *Sole mio* while the minutes tick away, and rushing off just in time to join his mother on the Paris train.

It is towards the end of *Albertine disparue* that we begin to feel that Albertine is dead and well dead. Afflictions induce callosity, says Sir Thomas Browne; and since the memory of such pain can die, we realise that the movement of the book, which is the movement of life itself, is not perpetual either. When Marcel at Venice gets a bungled telegram which leads him to suppose that Albertine is not dead after all but alive and contemplating marriage, such is his indifference that he realises she is even deader than he had imagined. Had the author done justice to this part of his scheme, had the theme "Albertine disparue" been expanded, doubtless we should have been brought to await the end of all in a similar state of calm curiosity. As for that end, the two volumes of *Le Temps retrouvé*, they are as carefully elaborated, and as good, as anything in the book; and what I suspect happened was that Proust chose to perfect these before turning back to the task of revising *La Prisonnière* and rewriting *Albertine disparue*, the task which in fact he was never to

accomplish. It is here, in the very last volume, that he gives us that theory of art which turns out to be no more than an account of his own method smartened up with tags of Bergsonism; and here he brings all, or almost all, his threads to one sombre knot. By administering an appropriate shock—the tinkling of a spoon against a teacup,—he drags the past into the present. He steps out of his reverie and the tea-room into the music-room, and there is the present waiting. There in the momentarily vitalised past live the shimmering protagonists; here in the present are their dingy ghosts drinking tea and yawning over music. Take a good look at them, he seems to say, see what transmogrifications the years have wrought, what glamour has been lost, what barnacles have adhered, take a good look: it is the last. Then down with them forever, and a good riddance.

È finita la commedia. And is there a moral? To be sure there is; a philosophy of life at all events. It is not very new, but it is true enough. Proust has explored depths hitherto unplumbed,

he has stripped the dirt and varnish from reality till his fingers ache and our eyes, he has seen life from a new angle and described what he saw with a frankness and precision unmatched in prose; and the conclusion to which he has come is the conclusion to which came the Preacher—and Shakespeare:

> All is vanity . . .
> . . . it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

Not quite nothing: Proust had his illusions. He believed that art and thought did signify something. Shakespeare knew better. Show me the philosopher who can be jolly about the toothache. Show me the artist, full of honours, masterpieces and years, who would not give the two first to have back the last; who would not pawn his glory for youth; who would not swap his critical and creative powers for his lost illusions; who had not rather be Romeo than invent him? Proust is dead; what boots it

him that his books are read and essays written on them? Though they last as long as the planet, the planet will not last forever. These disheartening truths Proust seems not always to have realised. What he did realise, realised afresh and with a new, a startling, intensity was the truth, in itself nowise remarkable, that only by being dead can Proust escape from life.

He may have wished to believe that by art and thought one can escape. He knew better. He pampered his illusions, but he knew them for what they were. Art and thought, like eating and drinking, have their delights and their narcotic powers; but for human beings, as Proust knew better perhaps than any one of his age, human relationships come first. Alas! that is the respect that makes calamity of so long life. Further he knew that of human relationships love has an intensity, a semblance of reality, with which nothing else in human experience can be compared. To imagine that Proust, who wrote sixteen volumes about love, sixteen volumes groaning with his own lament-

able feelings, believed that there was anything in life of equal cogency seems to me silly. Love also is an illusion: yet one lives. As Proust knew, there are drugs: for the common man the common round, the daily task, a little golf, a good deal of whisky, regular unemotional sensuality at fixed intervals, leading on to premature imbecility and an unearned grave. The normal man escapes from life by never living intensely. For the supreme artist, saint or seer, there is another sort of drug: he loses himself in an *O Altitudo*, and if lose himself he really does, blessed is he above all men. But for sensitive men and women in general living intensely means caring intensely; and because human beings are not works of art but clouds of midges blown hither and thither by circumstance, caring intensely means suffering intensely. Proust was an odd man, wherefore his experience was odd. He was forever falling in love—I use the word in its widest sense—and he seems never, not for one moment, to have been perfectly happy. He generalised his experience; and, as commonly

happens when people do that, he generalised wrong. For Proust a passion was from the first a misery. Proust was lucky; and the gods are subtler than he surmised. Certainly in the blossoms of passion lie the seeds of decay, and a promise of misery by comparison with which the raptures are nothing. But the gods know just as well as the poet that sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things; and they take care to give us an unforgettable taste of joy that for the rest of our lives we may know what we have lost. To suppose, as Proust does, that love is one unmitigated tale of miseries is to do less than justice to divine ingenuity.

Proust's philosophy of life was simple and sound. Honesty, intellectual honesty, is the best policy. Truth is not only stranger, but far more amusing, than fiction. You may call it, if you please, "a philosophy of despair"; it is nothing but the considered opinion of an intelligent man with a profound knowledge of life and a taste for truth. Proust knew that because human beings have been cursed with magnificent capacities

for conceiving and ridiculous powers of execution, with boundless desires beyond possibility of fulfilment, with inexpressible emotions, with feelings appropriate to heaven and hell to indulge them in, life is a business which, whether you try to make the best of it, or whether you let it rip, remains irremediably bad. Love he knew is the end of every man's desire, and he knew that in love what every man desires is certainty and permanence. Also he knew that the only certainty in life is change. About this there is nothing extraordinary; what confounds us is the vision, the imagination, the poetry, the analytical and sheer intellectual force with which he exposes his science. What Proust knew, if he knew anything at all, about the nature of the universe is unimportant; it is what he knew and still more what he could tell about that microcosm which is man, which is the marvel of our age. From the unsurveyed mines of subconscious memory he dragged up experience vital yet stingless and made the past live sterilised in the present. Then, on a pin's point, he

held his living captive till he had described it, and describing created a world. He was a creator whose philosophy served him to keep ever in the forefront of his mind that critical spirit, that respect for truth, which alone, it seems, can preserve a creator from nauseous egotism or sprawling optimism. From exaggeration he was not saved; but he is never vulgar, never sentimental. And if, some unlucky divagations notwithstanding, he avoided those messy pits into which most modern creators—Dickens, Hugo, Balzac, Dostoievsky—have fallen, that may have been because a philosopher was ever at hand to remind him, that the one wholly good gift the gods have given man is death.

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